

Supporting Your Loved One During a Difficult Deployment

Overview

Ways to reach across the miles and help your service member with a difficult deployment.

- Communicating with your service member
- Ways to help
- Finding additional help for your service member

“Being there” for your service member during deployment is difficult -- and it can be especially challenging when you sense that he or she is having a rough time. How do you offer emotional support from far away? What should you do if your efforts don’t seem to make a difference in your loved one’s ability to cope with the rigors of deployment? Here are some ways to help your service member get over the temporary bumps of deployment, and suggestions about what to do if you suspect that your service member needs more help than you can offer from home.

Communicating with your service member

- *Consider limiting phone calls.* Hearing your voice may lift your service member’s spirits, but he or she is likely to feel an emotional letdown when the call is over. Because this may make him or her feel worse than before the call, it may be better to communicate in other ways, such as by letters or e-mails. Try to plan this ahead of time and make sure that your loved one agrees with this decision.
- *Keep communication upbeat.* This isn’t always easy to do, especially when you’ve had a rough day and need to vent. But complaining to your service member about problems at home may be seen as insensitive to the conditions he or she is subjected to every day. It may also leave your service member feeling guilty and helpless, since he or she is not there to help with day-to-day activities.
- *Be clear and straightforward in your communication.* Vague statements may make your service member anxious as he or she tries to figure out what you’re not saying. Writing, “Things are much better now because I’m getting used to handling the kids on my own,” is better than simply saying, “I’m feeling much better now.”
- *Remind your service member of the stages of deployment.* If your service member senses you’re falling apart, or even coping too well on your own, he or she may become overly concerned. Remind your service member that there’s a natural deployment cycle that spouses go through, and that it includes feelings of helplessness followed by new confidence. Reassure your service member that you’ll do fine even when it seems as though you can’t manage, and you’ll always need him or her, even when it seems as though you’re managing too well. Literature about the emotional cycle of deployment is available through your family readiness or community service office.
- *Describe everyday events at home.* Running into your service member’s fourth-grade teacher at the supermarket may not seem like exciting news to you, but hearing

about it will help your loved one feel closer to home. Keeping in touch with these events can even ease the transition for your service member when it's time to return home.

Ways to help

- *If you have children, encourage them to communicate with your service member.* Sending notes, cards, letters, or pictures of special moments (birthdays, sports activities, and awards ceremonies, for example) can be heartwarming and help keep your service member feeling connected with children and family.
- *Ask your service member's friends to write and send packages.* Hearing from friends at home will remind your loved one of all of the people who are waiting for him or her. In addition to friends, think about asking your service member's clergy, favorite high school teachers, or former coaches to write. You may also want to ask your own co-workers and family members to write and send care packages. If your children are in school, you may want to talk with the teacher about the possibility of the students corresponding with your service member, too.
- *Send a self-help book or a book about spiritual growth.* Ask your clergy, the clerk at your bookstore, or your local librarian for suggestions. A good book will give your service member some tools and strategies for coping with his or her feelings. And just knowing that you care enough to try to help can be encouraging.
- *Encourage your service member to stay physically healthy.* Physical fatigue easily leads to mental fatigue. Without pestering, gently remind your service member to eat right, exercise regularly, and get enough rest. Always remind your service member to wear protective equipment, such as body armor.
- *Suggest that your service member talk with friends and/or the chaplain.* Opening up to buddies can help a lot by building connections and a sense of community. Your service member may find that others feel the same way, which will help him or her feel less alone. The chaplain can also provide invaluable support, as well as an outlet to vent frustration, fears, and concerns.

Finding additional help for your service member

If you suspect that your service member is under severe stress or is depressed and needs help, don't be afraid to take action. If the problem is caught early, the recovery will be quicker.

- *Get immediate help for your service member if he or she does any of the following:*
 - Often talks or writes to you about death.
 - Asks you to sell or give away favorite possessions.
 - Mentions eating or sleeping problems that have lasted more than two weeks.
 - Seems extremely angry or agitated for more than two weeks.

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- *Contact the appropriate person at the installation (or, if your service member is a reservist, at his or her unit).* This person will get in touch with your service member's commander or senior enlisted leadership, who will check out the situation and get help for your service member. Contact one of the following at your installation:
 - The chaplain
 - Your family support or readiness group, Ombudsman, or Key Volunteer Network
 - The health clinic
- *You can also contact your Military OneSource consultant.* This free 24-hour service, provided by the Department of Defense, is available to all active duty, Guard, and Reserve members and their families. Consultants provide information and make referrals on a wide range of issues. You can reach the program by telephone at 1-800-342-9647 or through the Web site at www.militaryonesource.com.

If you suspect your service member is suffering combat stress, he or she may be referred to one of the following treatment programs:

- *Combat stress control teams.* For deployments in combat areas, the military has begun to set up these teams close to the front. There are also combat stress platoons with some support units. Treatment by these teams is based on a method called PIES. (*Proximity*, which calls for treatment as close to the front as possible so that the service member still feels a part of his or her unit; *Immediacy*, which puts a high priority on prompt, quick treatment, usually for no more than three days; *Expectancy*, which fosters the attitude that this is a temporary need for recuperation; and *Simplicity*, which encourages the use of the simplest, most direct approach to treatment.)
- *Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM).* Here your service member can talk about an event that might have triggered the reaction in a supportive environment.

There are many things about the deployment of a loved one that are difficult, and one of the hardest is the feeling that you are unable to give your service member the support he or she needs. Demonstrating that you are still very much with him or her despite the miles should make it easier for your service member to withstand the challenges of deployment.

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